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Candidates Could Outline Differences on ABM Polciy

THE LIVES of the people are perpetual hostage to the sanity and good behavior of their leaders. This is the charter that inexorably rules the hourly existence of any major power whose nuclear force can threaten the survival of another.

Since President Johnson adjured another term, foreign policy has, supposedly, been a secondary issue in the U.S. election campaign. Many voters now can remember no other geopolitical climate besides the nuclear stalemate, and the last firing of a nuclear weapon in anger was a long time ago. The balance of terror is a supremely important, but unpleasant issue. It is eternally there, and its innumerable technicalities have become vaguely blurred, beyond hope of intelligent resolution.

AS THE election campaign rolls on, meanwhile, the leading candidates are adopting converging positions on the crucial issues of domestic policy that command the heated attention of the electorate. And at this stage of the negotiations, what could either Nixon or Humphrey possibly say that would credibly distinguish their policies on the termination of the war?

But we do face an era of Chinese nuclear capability, and the policies with which we face it may well determine whether there is an administration after the next one. If the candidates are searching for a difference, nuclear policy should be the area where they can scarcely deny it. The question is, how clearly will they articulate the problems so that the electorate will have a clear choice? In fact, the battle line might already be drawn over the intricacies of the ABM, the antiballistic missile project.

SECRETARY McNamara, judging from his Montreal speech, may have been the most liberal member of Mr. Johnson's Cabinet. "We still tend to conceive of national security almost solely as a state of armed readiness: a vast awesome arsenal of weaponry." However, "a nation can reach the point at which it dose not buy more security for itself by buying more military hardware—we are at that point. The decisive factor for a powerful nation — already adequately armed — is the character of its relationships with the world."

Last September, under extraordinary pressure from Congress, McNamara announced approval for the Sentinel system of active defense, with ABM hardware, of major U.S. ICBM launching sites. This decision has provoked continuing debate among nuclear scientists.

STRICTLY construed, sentinel is simply another means of hardening the launch sites against a first strike by an adversary, preferably one foolish enough to use grossly insufficient forces to begin with. The technicalities of its cost-effectiveness are beyond public reach and by themselves not a pre-eminent issue. It is obvious, however, that Sentinel is widely regarded as a trial exercise for a major commitment to partial ABM defense of cities, with a built-in escalation under political pressure to the order of a $50-billion investment. Far worse is the implication that such a system can have just one important utility, to protect the United States from retaliation for a preemptive thermonuclear attack on China. This implication does not have to be the intended one to work its effect on the character of our relationships with the world or, indeed, upon our own character.